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ABSTRACT

The percentages of adults needing adult basic education (ABE) programs in rural areas may not differ from those found in metropolitan areas, but the delivery of the system may be different. For example, the rural ABE teaching staff probably will be recruited from the ranks of the regular elementary or high school teachers to teach at night also, so may experience a higher turnover rate because of fatigue. Also, the rural ABE teacher may have to take sole responsibility for the program, recruiting as well as organizing and conducting the program, since the ABE director may be miles away. Students in rural ABE programs are often known to the teacher, which is an advantage in terms of tailoring the program to individual needs: but at the same time, persons who could make use of the program may refuse to attend because the community would then find out about his/her lack of basic skills which has previously been hidden by the individual's coping mechanisms. The rural ABE program may also be at a disadvantage because its location and teachers may have negative associations for potential participants, while urban ABE students can pick from several locations without previous negative associations. In general, the differences between rural and urban ABE programs arise from the different situations in which they are conducted, while their objectives and proficiency assessment are similar or identical. (KC)

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Practices and Problems of Adult Basic Education in Rural Areas

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Introduction

Adult Basic Education (ABE) has been a concern to educators and the populace of the United States for many years. Until recently neither states nor the federal government had an explicit operational definition of ABE or recognized the number of adults who needed additional learning to function appropriately in a democratic society.

The Adult Education Act, Public Law 91-230 and amendments, has provided a definition (Federal Register, 1979):

> The term "adult basic education" means adult education for adults whose inability to speak, read or write the English language constitutes an impairment of their ability to get or retain employment commensurate with their ability, which is designed to help eliminate such inability and raise the level of education of such individuals with a view of making them less likely to become dependent on others, to improve their ability to benefit from occupational training and otherwise increasing their opportunities for more productive and profitable employment, and to making them better able to meet their adult responsibilities.

Except for isolated cases, deficient adult learning was considered

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to be a problem of the "city" schools and rural areas failed to realize and address similar problems in rural areas. With the advent of massive reorganization of school districts into more efficient units, the awareness of adult learning problems and massive injection of federal and state monies into programs, the rural areas begin to develop menaingful and systematic ABE programs.

It is not the intent of this paper to develop a precise definition of "rural." Sociologists, census administration, educators and many others have varying descriptions of ruralness. However, we might assume a rural area does not include large metropolitan areas with adjacent suburbs but does include an area of towns, villages, farms and non-farm areas.

The opportunity for ABE programs in rural areas may be greater than in cities. Dr. Arni Dunathan (1980) found that school districts that enroll less than 2,500 students presently account for 75 per cent of the public school enrollment in the United States and further, those districts that have less than 1,000 students comprise 54 per cent of the public school enrollment. Since approximately 20 per cent of our population is enrolled in school, we are discussing school districts with a total population of 5,000 or less.

The Magnitude of Rural ABE

Is there more potential for ABE students in rural versus non-rural states? The data are inconclusive. One of the criteria for eligibility for many ABE programs is that the person must not have had a high school

diploma. The U.S. Bureau of the Census (Handbook of Adult Education, 1970) lists the median years of school completion by states along with the per cent of the state population who are twenty-five years or older. As you might expect those states with a higher percentage of adults have a lower number of median years of school completion. The correlation between these two factors is .836.

The ten states with the lowest median school grade completion by their citizens are: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia. Utah with a grade completion median of 12.2 tops the list of state with a more than twelve year median grade completion: Alaska, California, Colorado, Nevada, Washington and Wyoming. Rural states are included in both lists with California the major non-rural state. Obviously ethnic backgrounds and geographical regions are factors related to school completion as well as the amount of rural area.

Ethnic and social differences of rural population often parallel those of city dweller. The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently reported a study of the non-metropolitan population (outside of Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas) of America. These data are reported in Table 1. According to the U.S.D.A., approximately six million blacks, or 26 per cent of the U.S. black population, live in non-metro America. High school and college completion rates of non-metro blacks were significantly less than either blacks or white in metropolitan and non-metro areas, respectively.

Table 1

School Completion Percentages
of the
Non-Metropolitan Population, 1977*

	Blacks		Whites
Completion	Non-Metro	Metro	Non-Metro
High School	31.5	47.9	60.1
College (Males)	3.1	8.3	14.1
(Females)	5.2	8.1	9.8
Less than 5 years	18.0	6.0	3.3

*_____, "The Education of Non-Metro Blacks," USDA, Washington, D.C.

Population Sparsity

A major factor related to rural living is the sparsity of the population within a geographical area. Over many years the United States has evolved from a primary agrarian society to a business-industry society with a relative shift of population from farms and small towns to cities and suburbs. Although this trend continues the amount of "rural flight" has lessened or has even been reversed in certain areas. Certain social and economic factors have made rural living more attractive. While many factors, such as crime, high cost-of-living, pollution, low quality of life and so forth, attributed to city life are still found in rural areas, they are of less consequence or magnitude.

The state of Missouri may be typical of rural-urban characteristics

of the United States. During the 1979-80 school year 245 of the 600 certified ABE teachers in Missouri have address of towns with less than 5,000 population. Leadwood, Potosi, Elvins, Wasola, Loose Creek, Kahoka, Cross Timbers, Piedmont and Fair Dealing are not generally known and recognized outside of a regional area but the fact remains that 41 per cent of Missouri ABE teachers live and teach in small communities similar to these.

The sparsity factor can be illustrated further by an analysis of an ABE district in Missouri. An ABE Learning Center is located in Kirksville, Missouri, with twenty-four other satellite programs located in thirteen counties. The total 1970 census population in the thirteen county area is 174,496 and contains 6,719 square miles. Thus, the sparsity factor of this area is 25.9 people per square mile compared to the statewide Missouri average of 69.6.

The ABE Teacher

Is the rural ABE teacher then different from his counterpart in the city? The answer may be "yes" or "no!" The rural ABE teacher is a caring person, one who is concerned for the development of a student to his fullest potential, as is the urban teacher. Each spends many hours in recruitment, preparation, diagnosis of student needs, plans to meet these needs, instruction, counseling, testing and so forth. Perhaps any difference may occur due to the nature of the student served and the community situation.

Quite often directors of rural ABE programs have difficulty locating

and maintaining a cadre of experienced ABE teachers. The average tenure of the rural ABE teacher is approximately five years. Most rural ABE teachers are selected from among the public elementary and secondary teachers of the district. As a result of a daytime teaching commitment and employment of the student, most ABE programs are offered on an evening basis, six hours per week. You must be dedicated, with a liberal amount of stamina to teach in the public school classroom all day and then devote two to three nights each week to ABE instructional activities.

The evening commitment also places similar strains on students who may be fatigued from daytime employment. A nighttime commitment of two or more nights a week lessens the opportunity for social contact and recreation often sorely needed by the ABE student. The teacher, then, often develops plans to gain more meaningful social contact as a part of the class experience. Peer teaching may be appropriate for some while a cooperative project may be appropriate for others. Very often the members of the class plan picnics, field trips or simply bring snacks to be enjoyed during a break in study and instruction.

Many ABE nighttime students do not have sufficient funds for baby sitters. The author has observed some solutions to this problem. Very often high school home economics students have an FHA chapter whose members seek meaningful service activities such as provision of baby-sitting services. Or perhaps the child care class could provide the same service to partially satisfy a practicum requirement. Volunteers recruited from the ranks of RSVP or various organizations may be willing

to donate their services also.

Being from a small recruitment community or from a farm may be either a benefit or deterrent to effective ABE recruitment. Present students and teachers from rural areas can identify those people who could readily benefit from the ABE experience. Teachers are often aware of potential student's home life, family situation, academic level, interests and employment--all positive factors in recruiting the student and development of a relevant program. Most research has shown the most effective recruiter is a present student or completer of an ABE program.

The fact a person is known to many people of the community can also be a deterrent to effective recruiting of ABE students. Often adults with a lack of skills have adopted coping techniques which allow them to become accepted members of the community. They do not want others to become aware of their limitations, a fact which will become evident if they enroll in an ABE program. Herein may lie the most difficult task of the ABE teacher--to assure the students of the legitimacy of the program and to explain realistic personal and family benefits.

The rural ABE teacher may also have a problem that can be alleviated in an urban setting but quite difficult due to the mileage involved in the rural area. Quite often the potential ABE student has dropped out of school and bears some resentment toward the high school and the teachers involved. He may associate the ABE teacher with the school and his personal difficulty. However, many rural ABE programs may be located

thirty to fifty miles apart with the time and costs involved in enrollment at another site prohibitive. The urban student may only travel a few blocks to enroll in a program not associated with his prior negative experience.

Resources

Rural and urban ABE programs typically have equitable resources for purchase of tests, books, and other supplies. The rural area, however, may have a limited number of resources for the student to experience. Many rural areas do not have libraries, museums, cultural events, or even local daily newspapers to supplement the student's experience and classroom instruction. Some of the prepared materials, books for example, may be more relevant to a city dweller than a rural oriented person. A rural student may not be able to initially see the value of determining a cost of a taxi ride, read an urban bus schedule, or cost of a fillet mignon in the supermarket when he has not ridden in a taxi, never ridden a city bus and butchers his own beef. On the other hand, unless the teacher is conscientious, he may never have the opportunity to calculate the cost of grain fed a steer, the number of bushels of soybeans in a truck or the gestation period of a ewe. The ABE student must feel what he is learning is important. Most research has indicated the rural adult learner has similar academic aptitudes as his urban counterpart but may not have the variety of experiences readily available in the urban setting.

How then is the task of the rural ABE teacher different than the

urban teacher? Because of the sparsity of population within a given area there may be a need for only one teacher in a center. There may not be an opportunity to place students based on more homogenous needs. The rural teacher's instruction often varies from teaching a non-reader to read to preparation of students who will take the G.E.D. examination and all the variations within these extremes.

The rural teacher may be the only ABE teacher in the center and may be located some distance from the ABE director. The teacher may of necessity have to assume sole responsibility for the operation of the program. She is expected to recruit students, provide transportation to and from the classes, keep records and submit reports, counsel students regarding personal and academic problems, locate and arrange to use appropriate community resources, as well as conduct a diverse instructional program.

Summary

Any differences in rural and non-rural ABE teachers are related to the differences of situations in which they find themselves. Program objectives and proficiency assessments are similar, if not identical. The rural teacher must assume a singular responsibility for an ABE program in most cases.

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